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ABSTRACT

A high-performance learning culture is one in which each individual member is expected to perform to high standards. Based on review of the literature and research this short concept paper for trainers presents a conceptual framework for creating high-perform learning communities. The framework embodies five components: (1) vision; (2) mission; (3) core beliefs concerned with ability and achievement, efficacy and efforts, and power and control; (4) strategic structures, which include the physical environment, rules, procedures, policies, and relationships; and (5) distributed accountability, or collective responsibility, for learning. The paper asserts that the components of this framework are dynamic and interactive and that the framework organizes the elements to facilitate school leaders' understanding of the interconnectedness of the components. The framework also serves to guide and support strategic interventions intended to strengthen school culture. Additionally, the framework is meant to be an action-oriented blueprint for use by leaders who want to create a culture that supports learning. The paper contains a graphic representation of the framework and nine references. (WFA)

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Creating a High-Performance Learning Culture: A Conceptual Framework

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Creating a High-Performance Learning Culture:
A Conceptual Framework
Walsh, Sattes, Corallo, and McDonald

A high-performance learning culture is one in which each individual member is expected to perform to high standards. In such a culture, colleagues and peers support one another's efforts, and resources and structures are aligned with expected behaviors. To achieve such a culture in a school setting, school leaders take an action-oriented approach to growing a culture that is conducive to high achievement for students and extraordinary performances by adults. Based on a review of the literature and research on creating high-performing learning communities, a dynamic and interactive conceptual framework for accomplishing this work would embody five components: (1) vision, (2) mission, (3) core beliefs, (4) strategic structures, and (5) distributed accountability.

Many current approaches to school culture are descriptive. They are strongly influenced by the work of Deal and Kennedy (1982), who identified five phenomena associated with organizational culture: vision, norms, rituals or ceremonies, heroes and heroines, and stories and legends. While descriptive approaches advance understanding of the nature and shape of culture, they often fail to make research-based connections to student and teacher performance. And, in practice, they involve educators in assessing these facets of their school but do not always engage them in the kind of deep learning that leads to cultural change.

The approach embodied in *Creating a High-Performance Learning Culture* acknowledges the importance of vision and mission, and focuses attention on three spheres for action and change: core beliefs, strategic structures, and distributed accountability. The theory underpinning the approach posits that, while individuals' behaviors are guided initially by intrinsic personal beliefs, their behaviors can be modified by strategic structures designed to reinforce organizational core beliefs as stated in the vision/mission. Over time, changes in behaviors can lead to changes in beliefs and can foster distributed accountability—collective responsibility for student learning within a school.

Design of the conceptual framework (see Figure 1) for this approach to creating a high-performance learning culture began with the end in mind**: increased achievement for all students**. Using a process of backward design, the essential question was *If achievement is to increase for each student within a school, how will individuals within the school community relate to one another regarding issues of student learning?* Or *How will they conduct the business of school?* Distributed accountability, an approach that rests on each member of a school's faculty assuming responsibility for the academic progress of every student, is the defining feature of a high-performance learning culture. Given a vision grounded in distributed accountability, one emerging question was *What are the beliefs shared by individuals who accept collective responsibility for the learning of all students in their school?* A review of the literature revealed that beliefs in three critical areas relate to distributed accountability: ability and achievement, efficacy and effort, and power and control. A second emerging question was *What kinds of concrete organizational structures promote and support distributed accountability?* Research and literature pointed to structures in three critical arenas: physical environment, rules and procedures, and relationships.

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This approach to creating a culture that supports high levels of student achievement is neither simple nor linear. The components of the framework are dynamic and interactive; the framework organizes the elements to facilitate school leaders' understanding of the interconnectedness of the components. The framework also serves as "scaffolding" to guide and support strategic interventions intended to strengthen school culture. This is not a neutral or value-free framework; rather, it is an action-oriented blueprint for use by leaders who are committed to nurturing a culture that supports learning. What follows is a description of each discrete component of the framework: (1) vision, (2) mission, (3) core beliefs, (4) strategic structures, and (5) distributed accountability.

Vision

The vision of a school seeking to create a high-performance learning culture encompasses the following dimensions:

- All students are engaged in learning, and all are achieving at high levels.
- Members of the faculty and staff are accepting collective responsibility for the achievement of all students in the school—and all adults are working together to ensure that each student receives appropriate instruction and support in a learning-enriched environment.
- Both students and adults behave as if they believe their individual and collective efforts will improve performance.

Mission

The mission, reinforced by the vision, exhorts faculty and staff *to set **high expectations** for all students and to provide the environment, instruction, and support to ensure that all students are learning and achieving as measured by **rigorous standards**.* Individuals are guided by values, beliefs, and norms that are congruent with the vision and mission. Their behaviors are aligned with these beliefs and are facilitated and supported by structures the school leadership has strategically designed to reflect and reinforce the beliefs.

School leaders who commit to creating a high-performance learning culture embrace the above vision and mission; they enlist their colleagues and mobilize the entire school community in a collaborative effort to make this a reality.

Core Beliefs

Central to most definitions of culture are the shared beliefs and values that bind a community together (Deal and Kennedy, 1982). The foundation for the Framework for Creating a High-Performance Learning Culture is a specific set of core beliefs, which have been associated with high levels of student achievement. These core beliefs concern three areas: (1) ability and achievement, (2) efficacy and effort, and (3) power and control.

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Ability and achievement. Among the issues embedded in this cluster of beliefs are these:

- Can all students learn and succeed in school?
- Are achievement and success in our schools related to individual factors—such as socioeconomic, racial, cultural and ethnic background, or gender?
- Do most teachers in our school believe that ability is related to background factors such as race, ethnicity, home environment, or other demographic factors?
- Are there a disproportionate number of students of poverty and of color assigned to special education in our schools?
- Do our schools organize students homogeneously for instruction (i.e., through use of tracking or other ability grouping)?

Efficacy and effort. This sphere of beliefs includes the following kinds of issues:

- Do teachers believe that good teaching is the primary determinant of achievement for ***all*** students?
- Do individual teachers believe that they can make a difference in the learning of ***all*** students—that is, do they have the skill and the will to teach every child?
- Do ***all*** students believe that they can learn and that the effort they put forth will contribute to their learning and success in school?
- Does the school communicate to all parents that their children can learn—and that they, as parents, can make a difference in the amount of effort their children expend?
- Is there a "no excuses" approach to teaching and learning?

Power and control. Beliefs about power and control operate on different stages of school life: (1) schoolwide, (2) within classrooms, (3) across classrooms, and (4) between home and school. The following issues are related to power and control:

Schoolwide

- Is leadership shared?
- Are there mechanisms for distributing leadership across the faculty and staff?
- Are students and parents engaged in planning and decision making?
- Are the mission and vision of the school known by all stakeholder groups?

Within Classrooms

- Is there a learning community within the classroom in which students learn with and from one another and their teacher?
- Are students involved in setting goals for their learning?
- Are students authentically engaged in learning?

Across Classrooms

- Is there a professional learning community whereby teachers learn with and from one another?

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- Do teachers collaborate to plan and improve instruction?
- Are all school staff—including noncertificated—working to help students achieve shared (and public) goals for learning?

Home-School

- Does the school involve family in school improvement planning and governance?
- Do parents feel that have a say-so in their children's schooling?
- Do teachers welcome parents into their classrooms?The research literature related to these core areas of beliefs is substantial and links beliefs in these areas to increased student performance. Corbett, Wilson, and Williams (2002), for example, argue that "a fundamental shift in beliefs" is essential if schools are to provide experiences that will enable all students to learn. This, these authors argue,

> will require a significant investment of time and money to examine teacher beliefs about students, learning and instruction; build commitment to an agreed-upon set of valued beliefs; and establish a set of structures and processes that consistently reinforce those beliefs with actions in the classroom. All of this will require a long-term commitment to change. (pp. 148-149)

Each of these beliefs is also associated with a strong culture for learning, identified by Fullan as "a culture for change." He argues that successful school reform requires *reculturing* or "transforming the culture—or the way we do things around here." In his view, the real challenge of *reculturing* is activating and deepening moral purpose in a setting where "professionals work collaboratively with a respect for individual differences and a level of trust that enables the continual building and testing of knowledge against measurable results" (2001, p. 44).

How can a leadership team promote these core beliefs? First, leaders need to reflect on where they stand personally on such questions as *What would I be doing differently if I truly embraced the belief of high expectations for all?* and *How would our school be different for students and adults if we lived this belief?* Leaders then share with members of their school community the research and knowledge base that link beliefs to improved student achievement and performance. Leaders can use research and best practice to facilitate reflection, inquiry, dialogue, and ongoing conversations that challenge individuals within the school community to examine their personal beliefs and to look at the implications of the set of beliefs outlined in this framework for their own and others' continual learning. Finally, leaders can continually hold these beliefs in front of community members by modeling them daily and by sending appropriate messages to the community—through both the spoken and the written word.

Strategic Structures

Structures that can activate core beliefs and values so that they are manifest in the observable, documentable physical realm. Three critical cultural venues for the translation of values into action are (1) the physical environment; (2) rules, procedures, and policies; and (3) relationships.

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Physical environment. The physical environment in which learning occurs—including school grounds, hallways, restrooms, office space, the gymnasium, and, most of all, classrooms—is a highly visible arena in which to address "the way things are done around here." Certainly, logical beginning points for the expression of high expectations, for example, are the safety, security, cleanliness, orderliness, and aesthetics of the physical environment. These environmental factors are strong drivers of a school culture.

Rules, procedures, and policies. Both the written and the understood *modus operandi* are outward expressions of beliefs. Leaders can engage the broader community in reflecting on many categories of rules, procedures, and policies—including instructional, behavioral, extracurricular, attendance, personnel, and so forth. Are these written and unwritten norms and standards aligned with espoused core beliefs? If not, how might current practices be "challenged" in view of the core values and beliefs?

Relationships. Core beliefs manifest themselves in the quality of connections between and among individuals and groups within a school. A recent study concludes that the "resources and structures [necessary] to establish critical relationships" are essential components to sustainable school reform (Gallego, Hollingsworth, & Whitenack, 2001, p. 3). This is consistent with Fullan's argument that "the single factor common to every successful change initiative is that relationships improve" (2001, p. 5). Kouzes and Posner (2002) write about leadership as a relationship and contend that "success in leading will be wholly dependent upon the capacity to build and sustain those human relationships that enable people to get extraordinary things done on a regular basis" (p. 21). Relationships are critically important to the healthy functioning of the cultural network that Deal and Peterson (1999) identify as essential to the transmittal of organizational beliefs.

An important role of leadership is to create structures through which individuals in the school community can actualize or "live out" the school's core beliefs in concrete venues of the school's physical environment; its rules, procedures and policies; and individual and group relationships. Research literature suggests that it is easier, and perhaps less threatening to stakeholders, to first target the physical environment; then move to an examination of rules, procedures, and policies; and finally focus on relationships—following a Maslow-type hierarchy. In reality, however, all the components are interconnected. By engaging the community in an alignment of the physical environment with core beliefs, leaders are involving individuals with one another in a manner that will positively influence both procedures and relationships.

Distributed Accountability

One of the more significant findings of research on successful school reform relates to the value of adults within a school community sharing responsibility for the achievement of each and every student. A longitudinal study of high schools (Lee, 2001) found that *collective responsibility for learning* was the single most important variable separating high schools that were continually increasing student achievement from those that were not. Fullan and his associates at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (2001) find shared responsibility for

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student learning to be critical to school reform. Principals and teachers in the high-accountability environment of Kentucky found that by "distributing accountability" they could move even schools with the most challenging circumstances to top financial rewards levels (McDonald, 2001, p. 350). Distributed accountability is a way of being together in a school whereby every adult in the school community is accountable for the performance of each student, as described by Lee (2001) and Fullan (2001).

This framework for strengthening school culture argues that leaders can create conditions for the emergence of distributed accountability by fostering a widely shared commitment to core beliefs and by developing and nurturing the structures through which these beliefs can be actualized. This can lead to distributed accountability and a culture that supports high levels of student achievement.

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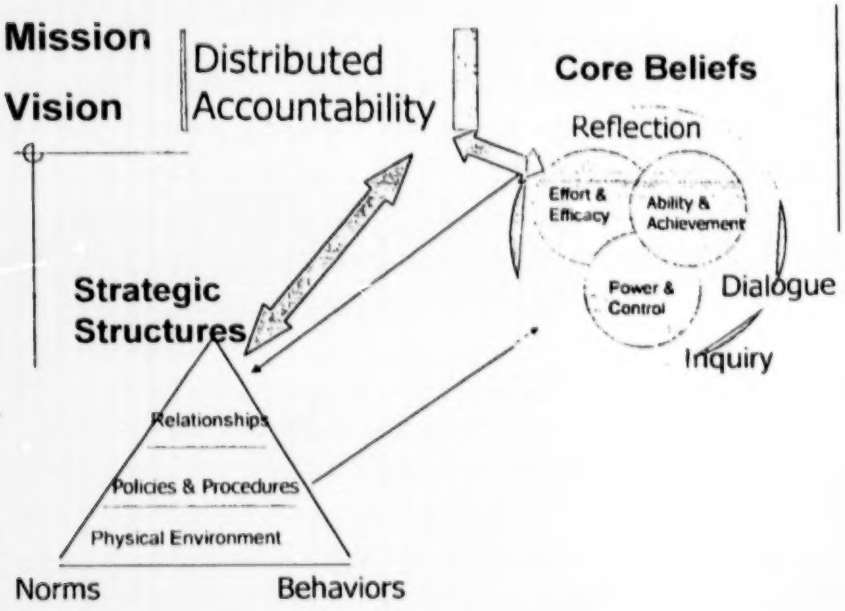
Figure 1. Framework for Creating a High-Performance Learning Culture



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